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## **Trauma and Degeneration: Joy Division and Pop Criticism's Imaginative Historicism**

**Paul Crosthwaite**

In an essay written to accompany a compilation of the work of the Manchester post-punk band Joy Division (and which features in a 400-page anthology of his reflections on the group), the music journalist Paul Morley writes:

somehow ... they drew into themselves all the greatness of rock's past and rock's future and received all this interference and information from fact and fiction, absence and presence, that transformed their music into an epic of timelessness ... Their music ... feverishly conjures up insecurity, malign gods, moral chaos, human lostness, caged energy, loss, shifting meaning and danger.<sup>1</sup>

Ascribing the utmost cultural, aesthetic and even metaphysical significance to the artists under discussion, this passage epitomises the kind of writing about popular music that I refer to in this chapter as 'pop criticism'. Identifying these artists as receivers of signals from past, present and future, and from sources both intensely close and unfathomably distant, Morley's commentary also exemplifies pop criticism's predominant analytical mode: an anti-methodology I call 'imaginative historicism'. In this chapter, I focus on 'writing about Joy Division' (to quote the title of Morley's collected pieces) in order to

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I am grateful to Rachel Carroll, Adam Hansen, Melanie Waters and members of the audience at the 'LitPop: Writing and Popular Music' conference held at the University of Northumbria in June 2011 for their helpful responses to earlier versions of this chapter.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Morley, *Joy Division: Piece by Piece: Writing About Joy Division 1977–2007* (London, 2008), p. 242.

pinpoint what it is about particular performers that stimulates the work of pop critics, and to identify the characteristics of the imaginative historicism they practise. In conclusion, I ponder the problematic ethical status of a brand of historicism that – contrary to the inclinations of this critical approach more generally – is invested in the *mythologisation* of the individuals and artefacts with which it is concerned, especially when they carry the tragic allure of suffering, loss and suicide.

### *Pop Criticism and Imaginative Historicism*

‘Pop criticism’ is the term I assign to that genre of writing that inhabits the discursive terrain between consumer guide, marks-out-of-five-style reviews of albums and singles and academic studies of popular music.<sup>2</sup> Like reviewers in the mainstream music press, producers of pop criticism are evaluative in their approach, often passionately, even polemically so; their interest, however, is not in informing the reader whether or not the record under discussion is a decent listen, or which tracks are worth downloading, but in establishing where the music stands with regard to overtly partisan principles concerning the form and function of popular music. By the same token, pop criticism shares with pop music scholarship a belief that what many dismiss as a trivial and ephemeral cultural form both possesses innate aesthetic value and is embedded in wider artistic, intellectual, social and political formations; yet pop critics resist the academic

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<sup>2</sup> I prefer the term ‘pop criticism’ to the more common label ‘rock criticism’ because in recent decades much of the writing in question has addressed genres (such as mainstream chart pop, hip hop and forms of electronic dance music like techno, house and drum and bass) which lie outside the domain of ‘rock’, however broadly defined.

protocols of argumentation, corroboration and citation imposed on scholars of pop, offering instead, readings that are wilfully imaginative, inventive and speculative.

The origins of pop criticism can be traced to the late 1960s, when three new American magazines, *Crawdaddy!* and the now better-known *Rolling Stone* and *Creem*, began providing serious, in-depth coverage of the contemporary rock scene.

Spearheaded by the two undisputed legends of pop criticism, Greil Marcus and Lester Bangs, literate, passionate and engaged writing about rock 'n' roll flourished in these and other American titles during the 1970s, and also began to take root in Britain, most notably through the work of Bangs' one-time protégé Nick Kent at the *NME*. In the UK especially, however, the electrifying convergence of uncompromising sonic assault, radical politics, avant-garde sloganeering and experimental design that was punk came to define the tenor of pop criticism, spawning a thriving fanzine culture and launching the careers of a generation of pugnaciously intellectual critics, including Paul Morley, Ian Penman, Julie Burchill, Jon Savage and Chris Bohn. It was also during the punk and post-punk period that the opaque vocabularies of continental philosophy and critical theory began to filter into reviews and interviews in the mainstream British music press. As legend has it, Morley and Penman's Barthes- and Derrida-heavy tenure at the *NME* in the late 1970s and early 1980s succeeded in halving the paper's circulation in just a few years.<sup>3</sup> A decade later, Simon Reynolds and others staged a short-lived but significant revival of what Reynolds self-mockingly calls the 'pale theory boy' school of criticism at *Melody Maker*. In the 1990s and 2000s, however, there proved to be little room for highly intellectualised writing in the UK's mass market music publications,

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Reynolds, 'Music & Theory', *frieze blog*, 18 Sept. 2009,

<[http://blog.frieze.com/music\\_theory/](http://blog.frieze.com/music_theory/)>, par. 3.

and such work migrated into more niche titles such as *The Wire* and magazines offering broader coverage of culture, style and the arts, such as *The Face*, *i-D*, *Artforum* and *frieze*.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, pop criticism has also carved out a space for itself online, in the form of sites like the American webzine *Pitchfork* and blogs such as the British writer Mark Fisher's *K-Punk*. In whatever form it appears, pop criticism continues to be defined by its concerted determination to, in Reynolds' words, explore and test 'just how seriously you [can] take music'.<sup>5</sup>

This impulse finds expression in the style of critical discourse I call 'imaginative historicism'. If, as Paul Hamilton suggests in his important overview of the concept, historicism, in the broadest terms, is 'a critical movement insisting on the prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of texts of all kinds',<sup>6</sup> then the variant of this approach found in pop criticism has particularly strong affinities with a specifically New Historicist paradigm that, as two of its leading exponents, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, remark, arose from 'the urge ... to see a vast social process, a life-world, through the lens afforded by a particular passage, a few paragraphs apprehended with sufficient passion, alertness and sympathetic intelligence'.<sup>7</sup> While New Historicist readings have sometimes been attacked as far-fetched, such accusations only have purchase because New Historicist critics uphold a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., par. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978–1984* (London, 2005), p. xvi.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London, 1996), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago, 2000), p. 45.

scholarly code that dictates that texts' capacity to bear the weight of significance assigned to them must be established by means of rigorous and extensive argumentation and evidence (even as these critics might want to adjust what counts as argument and as evidence). The imaginative historicism practised by pop critics, in contrast, does not seek to construct tightly argued theses about the historical meanings encoded in texts, but rather aims to convey to the reader the critic's impressionistic sense of the meanings evoked or conjured up by musical texts' moods and atmospheres, meanings that may be as eccentric, idiosyncratic, or – precisely – imaginative as the critic desires. For pop critics, 'there [are] the solid, reliable facts of the matter, but also the fiction, the dreaming, the unreliable speculation'.<sup>8</sup> As the expression 'conjure up' suggests, imaginative historicism is a more-or-less explicitly *occult* critical method (a form, if you will, of 'occultural studies'). Paul Morley acknowledges, for example, that, in his telling, the 'story' of Joy Division has 'something a little occult around the edges'.<sup>9</sup> As John Harris observes, discussing the archetypal long-form piece of pop criticism, Greil Marcus' *Lipstick Traces* (1989), this form of writing rests on the belief that it is possible to 'draw lines from bands to art movements and obscure bits of history', even if such 'lines', and the grids they form, cannot be verified in the terms of an empirical critical discourse.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Morley, p. 148.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 312.

<sup>10</sup> John Harris, 'Don't Look Back', *The Guardian* (27 June 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/jun/27/music-writing-bangs-marcus>>, par. 8. Accessed 5 June 2013.

Because imaginative historicism eschews empiricism, it is all the more reliant on a factor that is always, according to Paul Hamilton, essential to the power and persuasiveness of historicist criticism: style. As Hamilton writes:

If to understand the historical example is to establish the language in which it takes on significance, then criticism may come increasingly to be a question of style. Issues such as how persuasively we write in that language, how good our vocabulary is, how expressive our periods, become paramount. Our convincing *use* of the interpretive language is what matters, compelling the reader's agreement through rhetorical skill ... The justification of an interpretation is lodged in its expression. [Emphasis in original]<sup>11</sup>

Paul Morley, in particular, is acutely conscious of the compelling potential of pop criticism's style, noting that in his writing about Joy Division he has continually sought 'the one word, in conjunction with the right collections of words place[d] around it, or the one sentence, linking one particular sentence to another, that might communicate some of the force and immensity of the group'.<sup>12</sup> As we will see, pop critics have staked a great deal on their stylistic prowess in their writings about Joy Division.

### *Joy Division and the Grounds of Pop Criticism*

While other, better-known artists have received vastly greater coverage of a more general kind (biographies, memoirs, compendia, photo books, etc.), Joy Division has attracted an exceptional quantity of pop criticism. This profusion of text is testament to the fact that the band exhibits, in the purest conceivable form, the various characteristics

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<sup>11</sup> Hamilton, *Historicism*, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Morley, p. 253.

that inspire the imagination of the pop critic. In this regard, one should first of all note several factors that, whilst external to the band's aesthetic productions themselves, have helped to lend weight and significance to their work: a position in the vanguard of a major emergent genre (the diverse and inventive movement known as 'post-punk'), appearance in a place and time of sociopolitical crisis (post-industrial Manchester on the cusp of the Thatcherite revolution), and a substantial but not mass popular following (in the form of a gang of grey overcoat-clad fans dubbed the 'Cult With No Name'), the latter permitting the band to serve a representative or emblematic function with respect to the prevailing *zeitgeist*, and yet retain a certain underground caché. It is the defining quality of the Joy Division aesthetic itself, however, in its musical, lyrical and visual forms, which makes the group the perfect object of pop criticism, a quality that is best characterised as the capacity to hint at a near-infinite density of meaning, whilst simultaneously refusing to assert any singular, determinate significance.

Paul Morley – always, as we've seen, the most self-conscious of pop critics – has time and again emphasised this element of Joy Division's work, aware that the more forcefully it is asserted, the more effectively it serves to licence the elaborate, baroque interpretations that are his speciality. Reflecting on the recording of the band's debut album, *Unknown Pleasures* (1979), for example, Morley describes how the producer, Martin Hannett, sculpted an eerie, abstract and alien sonic landscape, seemingly haunted by obscure, cryptic signals:

He took the zipped, razored riffs of Barney [guitarist Bernard Sumner], the plunging, plangent trebled bass of Hooky [Peter Hook], the lost, lonely voice and defiant words of Ian Curtis, and gave each contributor all the room they needed – they were in their own zone, miles away from each other, and yet on



top of each other. Most of all, he embellished the popping, capricious drums of Stephen [Morris], pulled the idea of rock rhythm apart, and then nailed it back together using stoned time and dream space ... Hannett added and removed space, dropped in random rumours of sound, amplified emptiness, created a hollowed out impression of volume and violence. He put the bass and drums way into the future, and the guitar somewhere odd, solemn and disturbing.<sup>13</sup>

Expressly formulating a conceptualization that underpins much pop-critical writing about Joy Division, Morley elsewhere insists that the music is at once uniquely of its time and utterly timeless: 'Hannett wired the music so that, as oddly ancient and spaced-out as it instantly sounded, pre-industrial and post-industrial, it would never seem dated'.<sup>14</sup>

If Joy Division's music departed from the aggressive straightforwardness of punk, so too did the band's lyrics, which, rather than directly denouncing obvious social ills, instead hinted enigmatically at some state of existential unease at once personal and cosmic. As Morley comments, Joy Division's 'anger was not that of banal punks lobbing scowls at the everyday targets of frustration, but more mysterious, less domestic – rage aimed at time, history and the gods, aimed at the self and fate'.<sup>15</sup> In his obituary for Ian Curtis, Morley describes the singer's words as 'vivid and dramatic'. They 'omit links and open up new perspectives: they are set deep in unfenced, untamed darkness. He confronted himself with ultimate realities'.<sup>16</sup> Curtis' autodidactic immersion in work

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 16–17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 103–4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

by the likes of Ballard, Kafka, Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, moreover, has lent his own writing an association with what Jon Savage calls 'a certain sort of highbrow literature'.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, at their best, Curtis' cryptic lines achieve a genuinely ominous, unsettling effect, limning strange scenes in which the speaker is caught up, but from which he is also at the same time weirdly detached, watching events unfold inexorably before his eyes. In 'Day of the Lords' (1979), for example: 'I've seen the nights, filled with bloodsport and pain, / And the bodies obtained, the bodies obtained'.<sup>18</sup> In 'Shadowplay' (1979): 'With cold steel, odour on their bodies made a move to connect, / But I could only stare in disbelief as the crowds all left'.<sup>19</sup> Or in 'Decades' (1980): 'Watched from the wings as the scenes were replaying, / We saw ourselves now as we never had seen'.<sup>20</sup> Pop critics have rarely, if ever, performed close readings of Curtis' lyrics (arguably, on the whole, the words would not stand up to it). Instead, the non-specificity of the lyrics means that critics are licensed to respond in their favoured manner: by attempting to capture, in their own words, a diffuse but powerful mood or atmosphere.

The brooding, meditative aura that radiates from Joy Division's recordings, and so animates pop critics, is heightened by the band's visual aesthetic: the austere and highly stylised record sleeves designed by Peter Saville and the stark, sombre,

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<sup>17</sup> Jon Savage, 'Controlled Chaos', *The Guardian* (10 May 2008).

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/may/10/popandrock.joydivision>>, par. 34.

Accessed 5 June 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Joy Division, 'Day of the Lords', in *Unknown Pleasures* (Factory, FACT 10, 1979).

<sup>19</sup> Joy Division, 'Shadowplay', in *Unknown Pleasures* (Factory, FACT 10, 1979).

<sup>20</sup> Joy Division, 'Decades', in *Closer* (Factory, FACT 25, 1980).

invariably black-and-white photographs of the band shot by Anton Corbijn, Kevin Cummins and others. As Morley remarks of the visual appearance of *Unknown Pleasures*:

Peter Saville designed an audacious, opulently minimal sleeve that said little about who, what, where, when, why, but which said, in an unsaid, unfussy, unconventional sort of way, everything about the music and the makers, who were clearly something of a mystery, sending traumatised signals back from a spaced-out place where nothing was as it seems and Manchester was disappearing into the darkness.<sup>21</sup>

One photograph of the band – sealed into myth by its appearance on the cover of the June 1980 issue of the *NME* that announced the death of Ian Curtis – is especially effective in this regard. Taken by Corbijn at Lancaster Gate tube station in November 1979, it shows Curtis half turning towards the camera as his bandmates look away down a harshly lit, descending tunnel. For Morley, once again, the image ‘froze the group in time, but a time that was not necessarily 1979, or any particular known era – it was their own time, in a space between one reality and another, an otherworldly place their music seemed to slip and slither into and out of’.<sup>22</sup>

If Joy Division’s peculiar capacity to stimulate the imaginations of pop critics is a product of a consistently opaque musical, lyrical and visual aesthetic, then the group’s appeal in this regard is rendered all the greater by the notorious inarticulacy of its members. On the face of it, it seems paradoxical that it should be advantageous, for the purposes of pop criticism, that erudition and lyrical depth be accompanied by a more

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<sup>21</sup> Morley, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 351.

general inarticulacy. While displays of intellectual prowess in interviews with the press might have enhanced Joy Division's stature as serious artists, the band's monosyllabic responses to enquiries about the sources and meaning of their music, and the surviving members' continued reluctance or inability to account for the sound they produced, has the greater virtue, for pop critics, of further liberating the analysis: not only are the lyrics enigmatic, but the band is unwilling or unable to dispel the enigma. Enter the pop critic, free to interpret, speculate and invent at will. Or as Morley puts it: 'just because the group didn't know what was lurking inside their music didn't mean it wasn't there'.<sup>23</sup>

The band's apparent incomprehension concerning their own artistic activities has made it possible, moreover, to view them less as creators than as mere channels or conduits, such that the music is understood as an almost unmediated receiver of the social and psychic transmissions of the time, deepening its epochal significance, if negating the roles of individual technique and invention. As Mark Fisher writes:

they had no idea what they were doing, and no desire to learn. Of Curtis' disturbing-compelling hyper-charged stage trance spasms and of his disturbing-compelling catatonic downer words, they said nothing and asked nothing, for fear of destroying the magic. They were unwitting necromancers who had stumbled on a formula for channelling voices, apprentices without a sorcerer.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Fisher, 'Nihil Rebound: Joy Division', *K-Punk* (9 January 2005, <<http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/004725.html>>, par. 13. Accessed 5 June 2013.

Morley characterises the making of the band's second, and final, LP, *Closer* (1980), in similar terms, suggesting that the recording was at once a profoundly quotidian affair and the product of some inscrutable, impersonal logic, 'an absurd form of fate':

The stark facts are there, but many of the clues to best understanding how this remarkable work of desolate self-knowledge fell into place inside a couple of tense, banal and desperate weeks emerge when you accept that something remote and dreamlike was driving this story ... They drank sweet tea and ate readymade sandwiches and entered some sort of trance, separate but together.<sup>25</sup>

Ian Curtis' stage persona, distinguished by the extraordinary 'automated marionette dance'<sup>26</sup> that, as Simon Reynolds notes, 'mysteriously *preceded* his development of epilepsy [emphasis in original]',<sup>27</sup> likewise conveyed the impression of a figure under the sway of unseen forces, 'a performer possessed, flailing across the turbulent rhythms as if he was physically representing the wired state of his imagination'.<sup>28</sup>

### *Historicizing Joy Division*

The hold that Joy Division's small body of work has exerted over several generations of pop critics is well summarised by Mark Sinker:

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<sup>25</sup> Morley, p. 124.

<sup>26</sup> Fisher, par. 39.

<sup>27</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Blissblog*, untitled post, 10 Jan 2005, <<http://blissout.blogspot.co.uk/2005/01/kpunk-stunning-on-joy-division-and.html>>, par. 3. Accessed 5 June 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Morley, p. 14.

Though the first bullying shards of Joy Division's music are punk in sound, they don't clarify. This more than anything will become their signature – everything about them will be seized on, floridly discussed, and stay unexplained. Physical to a fault, the music exhibits all the signs of the cerebral and none of its content – invention pours out of these dullard-geniuses, so stripped of hidden agendas that hidden agendas is all that many remark upon.<sup>29</sup>

If pop critics are obsessively compelled to decipher Joy Division's arcane dispatches, what kinds of interpretations do these critics offer? What forms has their 'imaginative historicism' taken?

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this imaginative historicism as it applies to Joy Division is the multi-scalar referentiality that it attributes to the band's work: the albums and singles are read as opening out onto realities that are by turns immediately present and impossibly remote, in both space and time. Morley pushes an idiosyncratically personal interpretation – which stresses the specific, local and particular – to absurd extremes (whilst, characteristically, remaining at least half serious) when he remarks:

I recognised from songs that were abstract, grandiose and gothic the landscape they were describing – my local area. In a guitar lick or a drum pattern or Ian singing about the blood of Christ, you'd go, 'Oh, it's Stockport!' 'There are the hills outside Macclesfield', 'That's the sound of Salford drizzle'.<sup>30</sup>

As we will see again shortly, readings that find such precise and literal referential correspondences in Joy Division's music carry an inevitable air of bathos (an effect that

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Fisher, par. 14.

<sup>30</sup> Morley, p. 109.

in this case is at least partly intentional). I suggested earlier that the peculiarly charged quality of the environment from which Joy Division's music emerged – Manchester at the end of the 1970s – has helped to lend additional significance to the records in the minds of pop critics. In the absence (*pace* Morley) of direct references to this time and place, however, the relation between text and immediate context is most often construed by such critics in terms of an impressionistic evocation of a generic post-industrial Mancunian landscape, a landscape 'blighted with derelict factories and cleared lots'.<sup>31</sup> Much in the way that Paul Hamilton suggests, this historicisation will prove to be compelling precisely to the extent to which the pop critic succeeds in summoning up the appropriate stylistic virtuosity. Reaching (or, as he will later acknowledge, overreaching) for such an effect, Jon Savage, for example, writes in his review of *Unknown Pleasures* for *Melody Maker* that 'Joy Division's spatial, circular themes and Martin Hannett's shiny, waking-dream production gloss are one perfect reflection of Manchester's dark spaces and empty places: endless sodium lights and hidden semis seen from a speeding car, vacant industrial sites – the endless detritus of the 19th century'.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, according to Andy Beckett, 'if Manchester music has a legendary sound, it is the empty-factory echo of Joy Division',<sup>33</sup> while for Dave Haslam, 'it

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<sup>31</sup> Simon Reynolds, 'Music to Brood by, Desolate and Stark', *The New York Times* (7 October 2007),  
<[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/movies/07reyn.html?\\_r=2&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/movies/07reyn.html?_r=2&oref=slogin)>, par. 9.  
Accessed 5 June 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Savage, 'Good Evening, We're Joy Division', n.p.

<sup>33</sup> Andy Beckett, 'Bringing Down Chunks of the Ceiling', review of *Manchester, England: The Story of the Pop Cult City* by Dave Haslam, *The London Review of Books*

seemed as if the bleakness of the failed landscape around them was seeping into their music'.<sup>34</sup>

Joy Division's music has also been read as expressive of a moment of crisis whose dimensions are far wider. As Savage puts it, *Unknown Pleasures*, released in June 1979, 'defined not only a city but a moment of social change'.<sup>35</sup> Simon Reynolds, having insisted that there is no need 'to wax mystical' about such matters, goes on (waxing distinctly mystical) to characterise Ian Curtis as 'a seer-like figure whose private pain somehow worked as a prism for the wider culture, refracting the malaise and anguish of Britain in the dying days of the seventies'.<sup>36</sup> For Chris Bohn, likewise, Joy Division 'recorded the corrosive effect on the individual of a time squeezed between the collapse into impotence of traditional Labour humanism and the impending cynical victory of Conservatism'.<sup>37</sup> Taking a more geopolitical view, Reynolds elsewhere remarks that 'the barren beauty of that landscape of sound captured how lots

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(17 February 2000, <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v22/n04/andy-beckett/bringing-down-chunks-of-the-ceiling>>, par. 14. Accessed 5 June 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Dave Haslam, '77 Barton Street', review of *Juvenes: The Joy Division Photographs of Kevin Cummins*; *Joy Division: Piece by Piece* by Paul Morley; *Control* dir. by Anton Corbijn, *The London Review of Books* (3 January 2008).

<<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n01/dave-haslam/77-barton-street>>, par. 1. Accessed 5 June 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Jon Savage, 'Foreword', Deborah Curtis, *Touching from a Distance: Ian Curtis and Joy Division* (London, 1995), p. xii.

<sup>36</sup> Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 186.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Savage, 'Foreword', *Touching from a Distance*, p. xii.



of people felt at that late '70s moment: the dawn of the Thatcher-Reagan era, a freshly frigid cold war with renewed anxiety about Armageddon'.<sup>38</sup> In very similar terms, Mark Fisher insists that 'Joy Division connected not just because of what they were, but *when* they were. Mrs Thatcher just arrived, the long grey winter of Reaganomics on the way, the Cold War still feeding our unconscious with a lifetime's worth of retina-melting nightmares [emphasis in original]'.<sup>39</sup>

If, under the imaginative historicist lens of the pop critic, the referential scope of Joy Division's work extends from the group's immediate physical environment to encompass a condition of crisis staged on a planetary scale, then so too does it reach far back into the past. Thus, according to Savage, the music not only summons up the dilapidated state of the Manchester both Curtis and his bandmates knew, but also the revenants of an industrial history now fallen into ruin: 'Manchester's acres of dereliction were unbelievable. The ghosts of the nineteenth century were ever present. Quite apart from Ian Curtis' allusive, dystopian lyrics, the group encoded the city's hauntology into their music'.<sup>40</sup> Joy Division, Savage suggests elsewhere, 'used pop music ... to dive into the collective unconscious [of] De Quincey's Manchester: an environment systematically degraded by industrial revolution, confined by lowering moors'.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Morley suggests that 'the whole thing sound[ed] like the music was

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<sup>38</sup> Reynolds, 'Music to Brood by, Desolate and Stark', par. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Fisher, 'Nihil Rebound', par. 52.

<sup>40</sup> Jon Savage, 'The Things That Aren't There Anymore', *Critical Quarterly* 50:1–2 (2008): p. 193.

<sup>41</sup> Savage, 'Foreword', *Touching from a Distance*, p. xi.

whistling off the moors via the industrial history of Manchester into the technological future'.<sup>42</sup>

The latter two quotations not only summon up the Manchester of thunderous mills, belching chimneys and bustling warehouses, but also, via their glances towards the surrounding moorlands, inevitably call to mind a notoriously horrific chapter in the city's more recent history, the 'Moors Murders' committed by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley between 1963 and 1965. Such references are a recurrent feature of Morley's writing about Joy Division. He speaks in another piece, for example, of 'the shadows and omens called into dread being by the hills and moors that lurked at the edge of their vision'.<sup>43</sup> This particular response to Joy Division's music demonstrates some of the power of pop criticism's imaginative historicism, but also some of its limitations, both methodological and ethical. As long as the grim associations carried by 'moors' in this context are merely implicitly invoked via references to a moorland environment that 'lowers' or 'lurks' on the margins of Joy Division's desolate soundscapes, pop criticism is able, through the sheer connotative force of its rhetoric, to impute a historical depth and resonance to the music that, in Morley's words, 'may or not be there, but which if you say enough times with enough conviction, ... become[s] truth, ... become[s] real'.<sup>44</sup> This power is dispelled, however, when the connection to the Brady and Hindley

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<sup>42</sup> Morley, p. 78.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 239–40; see also pp. 13, 27, 258. Morley describes the music of one of Joy Division's labelmates in very similar terms: 'The first Factory signing was the chamber-punk Durutti Column, remembering music they'd heard in their dreams, or heard whispering in from the moors'. Ibid., p.15.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

murders is made explicit, as when Morley speculates that had Sean Harris, whose acting credits include the role of Brady, been given the opportunity to reprise his portrayal of Ian Curtis in Anton Corbijn's biopic, *Control* (2007) (having previously played the part in Michael Winterbottom's *24 Hour Party People* [2002]), the film 'might have conjured up some of that poisonous, unsettling, edge-of-the-moors atmosphere which seeped throughout Joy Division's music'.<sup>45</sup> Here, we see that when an imaginative historicism (whose default discursive mode is a form of poeticised *evocation*) moves closer to a more conventional historicism (which must, ultimately, venture a declarative *interpretation*, formulated in terms of a referential relation between text and context) it risks appearing hopelessly forced and over-literal.<sup>46</sup> Equally problematic, in this case, is the imaginative historicist predilection for intimations of the gothic and sublime, manifest here in a rehearsal of the cliché that some mystical, occult radiance emanates from these squalid crimes.

Pop critics' imaginative historicisations of Joy Division's music linger on a particularly gruesome episode in mid-twentieth-century history, and reach back as far as

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 353.

<sup>46</sup> Which is not to say that claims for a referential connection between a piece of pop music and these horrendous killings are necessarily illegitimate, as famously (or notoriously) demonstrated by 'Suffer Little Children' (1984) by Joy Division's natural successors as arch-Mancunian miserabilists, The Smiths. Indeed, the Moors Murders' influence on the aesthetic crafted by vocalist Stephen Morrissey extended to the band's name, a reference to Maureen and David Smith, Hindley's sister and brother-in-law (see Ed Glinert, *The Manchester Compendium: A Street-by-Street History of England's Greatest Industrial City* (London, 2008), p. 187).

the nineteenth century. But this is by no means the full extent of the historical periods whose spectres are said to haunt the music. Quoting 'Dead Souls' (1979) – 'figures from the past stand tall / ... They keep calling me'<sup>47</sup> – James Parker, for example, claims:

Curtis was saying, God help him, that somewhere inside him he had Egypt, Rome and the Third Reich. ... In one dimension, Ian Curtis was married, living in a small house outside Manchester, nine-to-five by day and having a laugh with his mates by night; in the other he was assailed by leadership fantasies, near-cosmic guilt and the blood-stink of the Colosseum.<sup>48</sup>

What is striking here is that Parker seems, if we take him at his word, to be suggesting that these distant historical moments are not simply invoked in Curtis's lyrics (hardly a remarkable claim), but somehow exist, for the tortured vocalist, as immediate – indeed internalised – realities, as if ancient Rome were as tangible an environment as late-twentieth-century Macclesfield. If this is imaginative historicism of an especially sweeping kind, then Parker's attribution to Curtis of a sense of 'cosmic guilt' points the way to the most expansive such responses to Joy Division's music, those which find in these records sounds that resonate far beyond human history, in the deepest reaches of the cosmos. Jean-Pierre Turmel, for example, in the famously esoteric essay that accompanied the original, French edition of 'Atmosphere' (1980), opines that 'an echo in the heart of the chance silence strengthens the overwhelming impression of a

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<sup>47</sup> Joy Division, 'Dead Souls', *Still* (Factory, FACT 40, 1981).

<sup>48</sup> James Parker, 'Chronicle of a Death Foretold', *Boston Phoenix* (24 October 2007), <<http://thephoenix.com/boston/music/49928-chronicle-of-a-death-foretold/>>, part 3, par. 4; part 4, par. 4. Accessed 5 June 2013.

subterranean quest. Echoes of grottoes and cold cathedrals, echoes of the infinite cosmos'.<sup>49</sup> For Morley, likewise, Joy Division's work confronts the 'appalling discovery that there's something rotten in the very fabric of the universe'.<sup>50</sup> At its outer limits, then, imaginative historicism begins to appear indistinguishable from a timeless, universalist ahistoricism.

We have seen pop critics historicise Joy Division's music in relation to the band's immediate present, and to both the recent and distant past. A further way in which the work gets read by pop critics – and here imaginative historicism's occult overtones are particularly palpable – is in relation to the future, to events that unfolded *after* the records were released. According to Morley, '*Unknown Pleasures* had a weird clairvoyant quality to it, as if it was anticipating its own place in history, even as it was being made in turbulent, very present-day circumstances'.<sup>51</sup> Dave Haslam makes a slightly different, and even stronger, claim when he suggests that Manchester's regeneration over recent decades as a major cultural centre and hub for the 'creative industries' 'might well not have happened without Joy Division; the story of modern Manchester begins with them and with [the band's label] Factory Records'.<sup>52</sup> For Haslam, it is not so much that Joy Division's music anticipated the rejuvenation of the city, but that this music (and not a range of structural economic adjustments at regional, national and global levels) actively brought this renewal about by bestowing a new

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<sup>49</sup> Jean-Pierre Turmel, 'Licht und Blindheit', trans. Paul Buck, included in liner notes to Joy Division, *Heart and Soul* (1997), n.p.

<sup>50</sup> Morley, p. 143.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>52</sup> Haslam, '77 Barton Street', par. 11.

cultural significance on the post-industrial ruins of this once-mighty Cottonopolis. This is imaginative historicism in full flight.

### *Aesthetics and the Real*

The most insistent claims for the future orientation of Joy Division's music relate to another, more personal and individualised, factor, itself a key reason why the music has proven so compelling for pop critics: the suicide of singer Ian Curtis at his home in Macclesfield in May 1980. For pop critics, Curtis's taking of his own life was the ultimate guarantee of the significance (in every sense) of the lyrics and music. In Morley's words: 'The intensity of the music would be sealed into permanent myth by the suicide of the singer – the utter reality of such an action could only succeed in spotlighting the darkness of the songs and confirm that the songs were made up of dense and packed truth'.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Reynolds speculates that Curtis 'planned it that way', that there was 'an aesthetic component to his fatal decision':

From the start, he was driven by a fierce ambition to become precisely the kind of edge-walking rock shaman that he ended his life as. The manner of that ending sealed the deal, giving Joy Division's music an appalling gravity and – for better or worse – an undeniable authenticity.<sup>54</sup>

Ian Mathers even claims, drawing on Jacques Derrida's notion of 'hauntology', that, on *Closer*, Curtis is in some way already dead:

Curtis' voice offers something genuinely disquieting from a hauntological standpoint: the sound of a man already gone, a ghost two (or more) times over

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<sup>53</sup> Morley, p. 261.

<sup>54</sup> Reynolds, 'Music to Brood by, Desolate and Stark', par. 13, par.14.

... This is music as the absolute limit of possibility, something there is no returning from. Curtis himself can only sing about it because he's already left ... The discernibly human aspect ... the voice, is the least present.<sup>55</sup>

For the pop critic, it is as if Joy Division's two albums and handful of singles, conjunctions of sombre visuals, enigmatic words and brooding sounds, at once contain, and are contained by, an environment encompassing crumbling warehouses and looming moors, abyssal cosmic reaches and a young man hanging from a kitchen clothes rack in a terraced house in a small northern town. Little does it matter that the precipitant factors in Curtis's suicide appear to have been all too mundane: illness, infidelity and marital breakdown. In the pop-critical vision, reality is aestheticised – it morphs into 'the world promised by the sleeves and the sound, a pristine black and white realm unsullied by the grubby compromises and embarrassments of the everyday'<sup>56</sup> – and the aesthetic, in turn, becomes an extension of the real.

As someone who has never quite been able to dismiss as insignificant the fact that he was born two days after, and some fifteen miles away from, the time and place of Ian Curtis's death, I can confirm the powerful lure of the kind of mythic, aestheticised picture of Curtis and his group offered by a pop-critical imaginative historicism. The potentially terrible consequences of such a vision are poignantly testified to by the music journalist Len Brown, whose 21-year-old brother Don, a Joy Division fan, fixated on an image of Curtis as 'a lost prophet' holding up a 'cracked

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<sup>55</sup> Ian Mathers, "'I Exist on the Best Terms I Can'": Joy Division's *Closer* and Hauntology', *Perforations*, 29 (2007), <<http://www.pd.org/Perforations/perf29/im1.html>>, pars. 8, 13. Accessed 5 June 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Fisher, 'Nihil Rebound', par. 56.

mirror to show us ... our world', took his own life two years after his idol.<sup>57</sup> *Closer* was on his turntable and his suicide letter quoted Curtis's lyrics. As Brown notes, Curtis's death appears to have been an 'influential factor' in the suicides of other Joy Division fans (including the celebrated British playwright Sarah Kane who died in 1999).<sup>58</sup> Nobody could lay the blame for such terrible acts at the feet of writers of pop criticism, and indeed a degree of ambivalence about its own myth-making role is a recurrent feature of the genre. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that such writing participates in what Jon Savage, in precisely such a moment of self-awareness, describes as 'the romantic notion of the tortured artist' that 'continues to stalk rock culture', carrying a profound 'human cost'.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Len Brown, 'The legacy of Ian Curtis: Love Tore Him Apart', *The Independent*, 2 October 2007, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/the-legacy-of-ian-curtis-love-tore-him-apart-395745.html>>, par. 4. Accessed 5 June 2013.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., par. 11.

<sup>59</sup> Savage, 'Foreword', *Touching from a Distance*, p. xiii.



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